

THE SUMMER HOMES OF THE SEA-BIRDS.

AS we pass along the Western Coast of Norway, we find few spots more interesting than those cliffs that are emphatically called Bird-rocks. From Stavanger, right away northward, round the North Cape to the frontier of Russia, these cliffs rise up, gaunt, lofty, and mostly bare of grass or foliage; and as we usually see them, from early spring round to late autumn, they are tenanted by multitudes of sea-birds, which, at times, young and old, seem to surpass in number the very sands upon the sea-shore. As we pass in and out of the picturesque fjords that branch off, like the fingers from the palm of the hand, into smaller fjords and still smaller ones, and ramify far into the land, pouring down from many points throughout their course lovely fosses or waterfalls, we still meet with these Bird-rocks, here and there, in going through some narrow channel or winding round some projecting headland.

We steam in and out of the pleasant Hardanger Fjord, through the many ramifications of grander and gloomier Sogne, the Nords Fjord, and the Hjörund, past delightful Molde and the Lofoten Islands, round the North Cape to the Porsanger and the Varanger Fjords; and in all these fjords, or in the precipitous cliffs that frown above the fearfully narrow passages that lead to them, or from one to another, we are never without reminiscences of Bird-rocks that we have seen, or that we may look forward soon to see.

These are the summer houses of many of our migrant birds; here they have for ages bred without let or hindrance; and herefrom they flock, as the long winter of Norway draws on, to pass the bleak season in regions that extend from our own shores far southward to the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, or even beyond the Equator to the far distant realms of Africa.

Above the waterways there tower aloft miles of elevated snow-fields called Fonds, wherefrom, in the warmth of summer, there pour down the Fosses that form one of the glories of the land; and behind these Fonds lie the mountains or hills, termed Fjelds, on whose slopes or crests, or in the dales that lie between them, breed many such land birds as the woodcock, the fieldfare, and the redwing—called by Linnæus the nightingale of Scandinavia—which we welcome to our country before there

sets in the long, long night of the north. Of the woodcocks we see nothing: in Norway, as in our own country, they are inland birds, fond of seclusion. The fieldfares build in colonies, like our rooks, mingled now and then with some of their other thrush kindred, the redwings; and these garrulous birds we may sometimes hear of near the people's houses. The Norwegians are a bird-loving folk, and treat their birds very tenderly; thus it is pleasant to find that, in parks or public gardens, as for instance, in Bergen or Throndhjem, you can get the sparrows to come to peck food out of your hand.

These Bird-rocks usually harbour at breeding times several kinds of birds, but sometimes each is mainly tenanted, by a sort of prescriptive right, by one kind alone.

In the common breeding cliffs, the guillemot and the razorbill—which are the mers or divers (*mergus*) of the Devonian fishermen—lays each its large and single egg; and the mother-birds sit so close to each other that they often seem to touch as they crowd together along the narrow shelf, where the naked bird is hatched outside, to encounter, often, the bleak blasts of the north. Among these birds, or between them, the puffin digs a hole a yard deep, when the spot is soft enough; and there it hatches a single chick, clad in so loose a mass of down that it looks like a ball of fluff, wherefrom there projects merely the legs and the beak. The difference between the naked razorbill, exposed outside to the rains and snow-squalls, and the downy puffin in its maternal hole, is something to astonish us. Amid these birds, too, there breed shags, gulls, petrels, and cormorants.

The largest Bird-rock, Sværholtklubben, a thousand feet high, said to be the largest bird-cliff in the world, is almost entirely occupied by the well-known kittiwake (*Larus tridactylus*), which, from its hind toe being a mere knob, is known as the three-toed gull. On this cliff the kittiwakes have built their nests for ages in prodigious multitudes beyond our power to number; here the nests, built of mingled bents and seaweed, remain from year to year on the narrow shelves, to be repaired, like rooks' nests, for each coming season, and added to, till they project, and hang on, or droop somewhat like the nests of the cliff-martin. When tourists arrive here, a gun is usually let off to arouse the birds, whereupon so enormous a cloud often arises that it darkens the whole sky. When King Oscar came here in his man-of-war, the birds had in their customary style, like the birds on the "Devonian Headland," got so used to gun-firing as to be almost powder-proof; and they could nowise be aroused for the King's gratification, till one of the corvette's cannon was loaded and let off, making with its peal so dire a thunder-clap against the huge cliff, that the birds, old and young alike, leapt out at last, alarmed, in greater numbers than ever.

Above these breeding-colonies there often dwells, as a sort of *recognised* robber, a sea-eagle, which can, with one stroke of its wings, sweep off a young bird; and so it lives with the colony as

a matter of course. But if there should appear any *unrecognised* pirate, such as a ger-falcon, it is vehemently and persistently assailed by the whole host of the bird-rock, till it is right glad to make off to some safer abode.

From these breeding places there pour southwards the innumerable flocks of birds that mainly swarm over far-distant shores, and inland waters, and other places, when the long night of the arctic circle compels them all to set forth to seek light, and food, and life, in far other regions. Some of them breed, partly, further south, along the coasts of the Hebrides, of Scotland, or of England; but it is in these far northern regions that their breeding-places are most largely to be met with; and it is only in these lands that some ever breed at all. Indeed, it is from districts farther north than these, from lands that no foot of man has ever yet trodden, that there flock in, year after year, multitudes of birds to swell the immense armies that, towards winter, pour southwards from the land of the long night. In what islands it is that some of the tringas or stints, the plovers, and the waders, actually breed, has only been dimly guessed at, but never yet actually determined or found. All that we know is that the breeding birds disappear northwards out of sight in spring, and that they return therefrom with their young, over the Arctic Ocean, as winter comes on, to join the mighty host that then pours south towards the lands of sunshine. Under the southernmost cape, Lindesnæs, the Brent geese pour in at the end of May regularly, in straight-lined rows; therefrom they sweep on, in the same fashion, over the sea, along the whole coast till they reach its most northern limit; and they still go northwards till they reach their breeding-places in Nova Zembla or Spitzbergen. Arctic travellers that have stood upon the northern heights of Spitzbergen have seen these rows of geese wandering over the icy sea in search of more farther islands, where no human foot has ever yet trodden. And the same thing happens with regard to many much smaller birds.

And it is utterly amazing to learn how far south these most northerly breeding birds have been found to go in migration. Some of them have been found in Damaraland, far south of the equator; some even so far as Cape Colony. Truly wonderful still is this yearly migration of the birds. We seem, even yet, to have got not much farther in our exact knowledge of these migrations than did the old poet when, with nothing but a poet's sympathy with this marvel, he asked:—

“Who bade the stork, Columbus-like, explore
Lands not his own, and worlds unknown before?
Who calls the Council, names the special day,
Who forms the phalanx, and who points the way?”

Sometimes we may even see parts of these enormous hosts of migratory birds. Once, when I was far north at a very late season, and when, on our way home, we were enjoying, as we came southwards, the wonderful beauty of the colours of the

foliage of Norway, as the leaves were preparing to drop, I saw hosts upon hosts of birds migrating, in regular armies, moving in one plane, up and down in their onward flight, with regular leaders, and seemingly complex evolutions and changes. It was to me a magnificent spectacle. These were, I was told, the solan-geese on their yearly migration to the south. The solan-goose was, by gannet-rocks and gannet-coves, pretty familiar to me as the gannet—a bird that is not a bit of a goose at all. But these armies probably consisted of brent geese, migrating to the south in other array than that wherein they move northwards in spring. And it was very delightful to watch the evolutions of these enormous hosts, and these I could trace along the coast for a long time, as our vessel steamed swiftly towards the south, on the same route as the bird-hosts themselves.

Among the birds that either breed in these far northern regions, or at least occasionally visit them, we meet with some that are strangely familiar to us. The wheatear and the redstart may be found on the fjelds near Hammerfest; the hedgewarbler, and the turtle-dove farther north still; and the very sparrow, both the common bird and its near relative the tree-sparrow, hardly distinguishable the one from the other, had, I heard, got up to Tromsø, the capital of Finmark, where, as with us, it makes itself quite at home. The magpie builds its big nest in the fagot piles near the North Cape; the cuckoo, on the heights around, entrusts her egg to the care of the rock-pipit or the wheatear; the sand-martins, where they cannot find other nesting places, dig their well-known holes in the turf-roofs of the houses; and the crows and the ravens make themselves nuisances by their readiness everywhere to peck at the fish that are hung up to dry. The willow-warbler sings his song here as blithely as he does in England; and in the most northerly willows that these birds can anywhere find, they build a nice round fluffy nest, lined with the white feathers of the willow-grouse.

Of the graceful little tits we find two or three species here, with the self-same ways as their interesting English kindred; and the fly-catchers, one or two wagtails, and the familiar walk of the starling, as distinguished from the hop of thrush or black-bird, delight the eyes of an English bird-lover among many birds that are new to him, in these far northern regions.

To such a bird-lover, however, most of the birds that he meets with are quite new. To him the eider-duck mainly calls up a light and truly delightful coverlet for his bed in very cold weather, but here his boat steams through flocks of these ducks, as he goes northwards; or in the Porsanger Fjord he is shown an island that belongs to the chief magistrate of Finmark, and is strictly preserved for the nesting places of these ducks, whose down forms the most valuable produce of the island.

The *Lusitania* steamed far north to the polar ice, along which the vessel edged for many miles, and the fortunate voyagers on board everywhere found birds of many kinds, with whales and shoals of porpoises, all around them.

An interesting question arises as to what, mainly, these enormous hosts of birds, old and young, feed upon. At stated times the parents leave the Bird-rocks, often in regular lines, and they return with crops full to repletion of succulent food. This they obtain in unstinted quantity partly from the ova of fish, but chiefly from enormous masses of crustaceans that drift to and fro all over the polar sea. The largest of all living creatures, the huge blue whale (*Balænoptera Sibbaldii*), finds ample nutriment in these prodigious swarms of crustaceans, of which the mighty giant's capacious stomach must, one would think, contain many boat-loads at a time. By and by the breeding birds and their young all leave the cliffs bare and take to the sea, and there they may be seen in entire clouds engaged in fishing. In winter the Bird-rocks are wholly deserted till March comes round, and then the preparation for breeding begins again, and the old haunts are once more seized upon.

On Sværholtklubben, as on other such cliffs, a very large number of eggs are taken for eating, but the Norwegians have not yet had recourse to ropes to secure these eggs, as is done in the Faroe Islands and in some parts of Scotland. They obtain as many as they want without having recourse to any such devices as this.

The more we get to know of these northern regions the more shall we have reason to be filled with wonder at the many and varied things that they disclose to us. The flora of the land is well worthy of study. Sometimes we may see a whole island covered, in June, with the white flowers of the cloudberry, and these produce in autumn luxuriant branches of red berries that are much sought after. And at another time we hear of shores and islands lying farther north than Scandinavia where prodigious masses have been discovered of bones and tusks of the mammoth and the woolly rhinoceros, thus forming, in the *Arctic* Ocean, Treasure-islands richer than any that poets have feigned amid the waters of the *Pacific*. These are the remains of hosts of huge animals that seem to have been overwhelmed or destroyed in some one of those ice-ages, of which Sir Robert Ball discourses to us so freely and so delightfully. We follow him with much interest when he shows us, by exact mathematical demonstration, that the ice-cap shifts periodically from the one pole to the other, the astronomer's pendulum beating *ages* as the clock's pendulum beats *seconds*. And imagination tries to picture the state of the North Pole when the last glacial age had shifted to the south; or what might have happened when the pendulum swung back again, and the increasing ice and advancing waters entombed, perhaps, all these mammoths and woolly rhinoceroses in the Treasure-islands where we now find their remains.

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